

GARRITT VAN DYK

# The Embassy of Soliman Aga to Louis XIV: Diplomacy, Dress, and Diamonds

## ABSTRACT

*Prolonged contact with exoticism during the Embassy of Soliman Aga to Louis XIV has been cited by scholars as the cultural influence responsible for acceptance of coffee by Parisian nobles and the inspiration for Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*.<sup>1</sup> Diplomatic historians have either documented the encounter as a cautionary tale about the importance of protocol, or focused on the trade negotiations between the Ottoman Empire and France as a point of contention.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I examine how dress was used by different participants in the diplomatic encounter, not to track the genealogy of Turkish dress or the development of *Turquerie* in France,<sup>3</sup> but to consider dress as a cultural source providing additional context through which to evaluate the embassy.*

## Introduction

In 1669 Sultan Mehmet IV sent a diplomatic representative, Soliman Aga, to France. His mission was simple: deliver a letter from the Sultan to Louis XIV, and no one else. Yet, Soliman Aga's visit was complicated by various factors, including his concealed diplomatic status, competing claims for diplomatic *savoir-faire*, and the inability of Louis XIV's Oriental experts to translate Turkish.<sup>4</sup> To make matters worse, the first official diplomatic audience granted to Aga was given by the French Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Hugues de Lionne, dressed as a Turk, in the regalia of the Grand Vizier of the Sublime Port. What should have been an uncomplicated visit by a foreign representative took on the air of a comedy of errors, replete with hidden identities and miscommunications and was to be fodder for Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670). The play was commissioned by Louis XIV immediately after Soliman Aga's departure, and it indirectly commemorates the first

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<sup>1</sup> For influence on coffee see: Spary, 2013. For Molière, see: Longino, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Wicquefort, 1690, Book 1, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup> For influence of Turkish dress on French identity see Landweber, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Oriental studies in seventeenth-century France, see Dew, 2009.

time a French diplomat in Paris received a representative of the Ottoman Empire 'in mufti'.

The appropriation of Turkish dress by a French diplomatic official, the clothes worn by Soliman Aga when he is received by Louis XIV, and the first public appearance by the Sun King dressed in diamonds, all contribute to a more helpful understanding of this moment of diplomatic and cultural contact between France and the Ottoman Empire. Through an analysis of the chronology of events, and the response of contemporary commentators, I will show how dress communicated the shifting dynamics of the diplomatic exchange and reflected the underlying political agendas of Louis XIV and Sultan Mehmet IV.

## The Diplomatic Context

Since 1533, the Ottoman Empire had sent envoys to France only five times, and had had no permanent diplomatic presence in France. François I had established the first European embassy in the Ottoman Empire in 1536, but the rulers of the Ottoman Empire only established embassies in Hungary and Persia, reflecting the value they attached to maintaining alliances or monitoring potential aggressors.<sup>5</sup> That Louis XIV recalled the French ambassador to the Sublime Porte, without sending a replacement, was not a new phenomenon. The French ambassador from 1653-1659, Denis de la Haye, was recalled in 1659, and an agent, Jean-François Roboly, was sent to fill his position until a suitable replacement could be found. For a period of four years, Roboly successfully managed French interests, until de la Haye's son was selected to replace Roboly.<sup>6</sup>

Ten years later, however, Franco-Ottoman relations were in desperate need of repair. The relationship had deteriorated following a decade of attacks on French ships by Barbary corsairs, which had decimated the merchant fleet. Diplomatic ties were also tested by French military support for the Republic of Venice against the Ottoman Empire in the battle for Crete. Merchants from Marseille had also jeopardised trade relations in the Levant by paying for their purchases with counterfeit coins minted outside of France. Repeated attempts by French ambassadors to renegotiate the bilateral trade agreements, the Capitulations, were

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<sup>5</sup> Göçek, 1987. p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Mézin, 1998. p. 523.

unsuccessful despite more favourable terms having been offered to the Dutch and English merchants.<sup>7</sup>

The inequality of their diplomatic relationship in the middle of the seventeenth century was reflected in this trade relationship. French silver bought Oriental goods which were imported into France, but French textiles found no corresponding demand. Despite the undesirable outflow of silver currency and lacklustre demand for French goods, the Levant was nonetheless the most significant maritime trade relationship for France. From the perspective of the Ottoman Empire, foreign trade generated customs revenue, but this gain was a secondary concern to the Sultan compared to the glory achieved through military conquest.

French diplomatic efforts in 1668 had failed to improve trade through renegotiation of the Capitulations, and Louis XIV recalled his ambassador, de la Haye. According to the memoirs of the Chevalier d'Arvieux, the ambassador made a last effort to obtain new terms when he went to advise the Sultan's ministers that he had been recalled. This request was forwarded to the Sultan because of the ambassador's pending departure. He conferred with all his ministers, who agreed that no negotiation should take place with an ambassador whose master no longer had faith in him, but decided instead to send a message to the King of France to question whether the fundamental basis for their relationship had changed. The ambassador remained, and the French warships sent to collect him returned instead with Soliman Aga.<sup>8</sup>

Jean-Baptiste Chardin, Huguenot traveller and East India Merchant, speculated in his *Journal du Voyage* (1686) that ambassador de la Haye engineered the dispatch of the Turkish envoy, but, this underestimated the significant influence that would have been necessary for the Frenchman to accomplish this ploy.<sup>9</sup> Chardin's allegation is also at odds with English trade attaché Paul Rycaut's description of Ottoman attitudes towards foreign ambassadors. According to Rycaut, the Sultan thought that foreign diplomats had two roles: negotiators and hostages.<sup>10</sup> Colbert wrote to Louis XIV in September 1669 that de la Haye was rumoured to be

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<sup>7</sup> Duparc, 1969, p. 25. The complementary instructions written by Hugues de Lionne provided the ambassador with the historical background to the decline of French trade in the region and the importance of renewing the Capitulations.

<sup>8</sup> D'Arvieux, 1735, pp. 110-13.

<sup>9</sup> Chardin, 1686, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Rycaut, 1686, p. 164.

imprisoned.<sup>11</sup> Against this background of political and military rivalry, and a breakdown in diplomatic relations, Sultan Mehmet IV sent Soliman Aga to France with a sealed letter to be relinquished only to Louis XIV.

### 'Playing the Turk': An Unsuccessful Inversion, Lost in Translation

The first formal audience for Soliman Aga was not in Paris with the king, but in Suresnes, where he was received by the *secrétaire d'Etat aux Affaires étrangères*, Hugues de Lionne. D'Arvieux's memoirs are once again a valuable source providing rich details related to dress and diplomacy.<sup>12</sup> De Lionne was unsure of the capacity in which Soliman appeared before him, as the *lettre de créance* detailing his diplomatic status had not yet been disclosed because this letter was to be delivered only to Louis XIV himself. But, Soliman Aga did have another letter to be delivered to the 'Grand Vizier of France'. Since there was no French political position equivalent to a Grand Vizier, and with de Lionne unaccustomed to receiving Turkish diplomats, he decided to receive the Turkish representative in the same way that French diplomats were received in the Sublime Porte.

As part of this reproduction of Turkish protocol, on the advice of the king's *grand-maître de la garde-robe* M. Guitry, de Lionne dressed as a Turk in black robes to appear like the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire. He received Soliman Aga seated cross-legged on a raised platform, covered with a finely-woven carpet embellished with gold, and strewn with brocade cushions – a re-creation of the sofa of the Grand Vizier. The only element of the impersonation which disrupted the illusion of Ottoman dress was the cross of *Saint Esprit* embroidered in gold on his black robe, and fashioned from gemstones, hanging on a blue ribbon on his chest.

During the audience with de Lionne, Soliman Aga produced a letter from the Caïmacan (the deputy to the Grand Vizier) and relayed the Sultan's message that he wanted to maintain their relationship and sought clarification about the French ambassador being withdrawn from the Porte. At this point it became apparent to Soliman's translator, M. la Fontaine (provided by the French ambassador de la Haye), and to de Lionne, that the royal translator, M. de la Croix could not speak Turkish – he could only read it. Even in this capacity de la Croix fell short, as he required the dictionary in his library in Paris to translate the letter. This catastrophic

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<sup>11</sup> AN AM B28, f. 126 21/9/1669. This is further supported by the memoirs of Nicolas de Saintot, *grand maître des cérémonies*. Saintot's version of events recorded that Soliman Aga stated, in his royal audience, that the Sultan had retained M. de la Haye: BNF MS 16633, p.125.

<sup>12</sup> D'Arvieux, 1735, pp. 133-40.

failure to communicate cut the audience short, and la Fontaine demanded a new interpreter before they would meet again. The Chevalier d'Arvieux was enlisted to act as translator for the next meeting, and to double-check the accuracy of the translation of the Caïmacan's letter.<sup>13</sup>

The substance of the next meeting is known, as de Lionne arranged to have his prepared speech printed in advance, so news of his audience would be widely communicated.<sup>14</sup> Once again he was dressed in Turkish garb, perched on his sofa.<sup>15</sup> Having impersonated the Grand Vizier, not only in dress, but in authority, de Lionne was now faced with the task of explaining that he was not acting in the capacity of a Grand Vizier. The foreign secretary had also heard that someone had told Soliman that in France there were three Grand Viziers, so his power was only one-third of what a Grand Vizier would have. De Lionne explained that these ideas were injurious to the glory of His Majesty, whose power was absolute. As a secretary, he did not act independently, but in the execution of the king's wishes. Soliman had been received in the same manner that French diplomats were received at the Porte – not by the Sultan, but by the Grand Vizier. This level of parity was meant to reflect that both rulers were equal in dignity, power and grandeur. In France, however, there was no comparable title to Grand Vizier, and no government official between the king and his ministers. As the Secretary of State for foreign affairs, the role was most appropriate for de Lionne. He cautioned Soliman, however, that if the word 'Elchi'[sic] – Turkish for ambassador – did not appear in the Sultan's letter, then he would be dismissed by the king.<sup>16</sup>

D'Arvieux recounts the Turkish response in his memoirs. Soliman Aga replied that he did not come to France to learn their system of government. It was enough for him to know that Louis XIV was a powerful monarch, for whom he had the greatest respect. His commission was to deliver a letter into the hands of the king, and relay the good will that the Sultan wanted to maintain with him. As soon as this has been accomplished, Soliman would return home. Despite de Lionne's repeated requests, the Turkish envoy refused to relinquish the Sultan's letter to the king. Having reached an impasse, the traditional Ottoman trio of coffee, sherbet and *parfums* was served to signal the end of the audience.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> D'Arvieux, 1735, pp. 133-43.

<sup>14</sup> La Gazette, 1669A, p. 1125-8.

<sup>15</sup> D'Arvieux, 1735, pp. 145-6.

<sup>16</sup> La Gazette, 1669A, p. 1128.

<sup>17</sup> D'Arvieux, 1735, p.149-50.



One of the few prints depicting Soliman Aga's visit shows his second meeting with de Lionne (Fig. 1). The caption, which reads, 'The King my Master, governs himself, he sees all, he hears all, he commands all', emphasises the absolute authority of Louis XIV, which was not delegated.<sup>18</sup> A large portrait of Louis XIV appears in the middle of the composition, dominating the space occupied by the participants, emphasising his centrality and absolute control. Significantly, the print does not show the French minister dressed as the Grand Vizier, or the Turkish décor and furnishings that were employed to replicate the environment of the Sublime Porte. The absence of these elements suggests that they were deliberately omitted to avoid commemorating de Lionne's diplomatic gaffe in appropriating Turkish dress and protocol.



Figure 1. Jean Lepautre, *Le Roy, mon maître gouverne luy-même, il voit tout, il entend tout, il ordonne de tout, etc. Audiance de M. de Lionne à Soliman Mustaferraga, 1669*, print, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESE.

It seems likely that this departure from the cultural norm for these audiences was a deliberate move to gain the upper hand in the diplomatic exchange. Unable to confirm Aga's diplomatic status, de Lionne claimed that the replication of their customs was meant to provide absolute parity in terms of how French diplomats were received in the Porte. Adoption of foreign dress and protocol, however,

<sup>18</sup> 'Le Roi, mon Maître gouverne lui-même, il voit tout, il entend tout, il ordonne tout'. Author's translation.

appears to be more of an attempt to teach the Turkish visitor, and his masters, a lesson: did he enjoy being treated the way French diplomats perceived they were treated? This 'lesson' was not as effective as might have been hoped. Any advantage gained through the attempted inversion of cultural norms was disrupted by the inability of the royal Orientalist experts to translate spoken Turkish, with de Lionne was forced to rely on the practical skills of D'Arvieux, an aspiring merchant, to communicate.

### **Dressing the Part: The Exotic Allure of Infidel Dress**

The Chevalier d'Arvieux had been invited by Colbert to attend the meetings as an observer. While living in the Levant and working as a merchant, he taught himself to speak and read Syriac, Turkish, Arabic and Hebrew. D'Arvieux was keenly attuned to the cultural sensitivities of the Levant, perhaps more so than to those of France, where he lamented that despite his fluency in Oriental languages, he had not learned the language of the court. He had come to court to seek his fortune, hoping to acquire a role as an agent for government-sponsored trade in the Ottoman Empire. Instead, he was rewarded with the role of *écuyer* to the *Maréchalle de la Motte*. In part, he received this role because he met with the Dauphin, who was impressed by his ability to speak foreign languages. D'Arvieux observed this thirst for novelty, and described the court as a 'country where curiosity is the dominant fashion'.<sup>19</sup> This curiosity about the Orient caused Madame de Montespan and Madame de la Valliere to detain him for several hours as they prepared themselves for a court appearance, quizzing him on the customs of Turkish women.<sup>20</sup> The Dauphin was also interested in tales from the East, but was especially intrigued by the idea of Oriental dress. The young prince requested a command performance by D'Arvieux: 'I had to arrange for my Turkish and Arabian clothes to be brought from Marseille, so I could dress up in these outfits for the Prince.'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> 'pâis où la curiosité est fort à la mode', D'Arvieux, 1735. p. 98. Author's translation.

<sup>20</sup> 'Je les entretins pendant qu'elles furent à leur toilette sur les coutumes des Dames de Turquie, & sur le sujet de mon voyage.' D'Arvieux, 1735, p. 292. Author's translation.

<sup>21</sup> 'Je fus obligé de faire venir de Marseille mes habits Turcs & Arabes, afin de paroître dans ces habits devant ce Prince.' D'Arvieux, 1735, p. 98. Author's translation.





Figure 2. Philippe de Champaigne, *Portrait of Jean de Thévenot*, ca.1660. Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 43.2 cm, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens. Purchased with funds from the Art Collectors' Council and the Browning Memorial Art Fund, Object Number: 2010.2.



Paul Rycaut, in his *History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1686), commented on the seduction of Oriental dress as a method used by the Ottoman Empire to increase its population, and subvert Christianity:

It is no small inducement to the common people, who is most commonly won with outward allurements, to become *Turks*; that when they are so, by a white Turbant ... we shall not wonder if the ignorant and vain amongst Christians ... should be caught and entrapt with the fancy and enticement of the Turkish Mode ... and thus the Turk makes his habit a bait to draw some to his superstition.<sup>22</sup>

Rycaut suggests that the novelty of Turkish dress is attractive to 'common people' partly because it permits an appropriation of foreign symbols of status, such as a white turban. He did not see this adoption of this 'Turkish Mode' as a harmless affectation of travellers, but as a step in a transformation from the outside in, which would end with conversion to Islam.

Adoption of Turkish dress amongst travellers to the East can be seen in Phillippe de Champaigne's (1602-1667) portrait of linguist Jean de Thévenot (1633-1677) (Fig. 2). Painted between 1660-63, the work shows Thévenot in Turkish dress with a tasselled turban, a cloak of gold brocade, and a jewelled sword. Domed buildings seen in the background of the portrait suggest a foreign location for the portrait, referencing Ottoman architecture and the subject's extensive travel in the Levant. Thévenot published an account of his voyage with observations on Turkish culture, dress, mores, society and government. In the text, underneath the frontispiece engraving which shows the author in more subdued Turkish dress pointing to a map, he declared himself a model tourist: 'Friend, you will know the author by this portrait; you will never find a more perfect traveller.'<sup>23</sup> Champaigne's portrait of Thévenot in Turkish dress in the Levant reinforces this idea of the subject as an ideal tourist. As a "perfect traveller" he has immersed himself in foreign culture while on tour, appropriating native garb as part of his cultural experience.

It is against this backdrop that D'Arvieux opposed the substitution of foreign dress for French grandeur when receiving foreign diplomats in France. In recounting the meeting in his memoirs, D'Arvieux was critical of de Lionne's sartorial stratagem:

As for the ceremony, I took the liberty to tell him it seemed to me very improper to affect Turkish manners in France, and that it would have been better to receive the Envoy according to French grandeur, as we lower

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<sup>22</sup> Rycaut, 1686, p. 147.

<sup>23</sup> 'Amy [sic] tu connaîtras l'Auteur par ce portrait; Tu ne saurais trouver yoyageur plus parfait', De Thévenot, 1665, Frontispiece. Author's translation. For a thorough discussion of the painting's provenance see Longino, 2015, pp. 51-3.

ourselves to take on their customs; as much as we might want to do so in the name of equal treatment, it was not necessary to act as they act; and just as they do not abandon their customs when they are in France, it seemed to me that it detracted from the grandeur of our monarch, to conform to such manners that are quite foreign to us.<sup>24</sup>

In saying this, D'Arvieux did not speak from ignorance, or prejudice. In his fifteen years as a merchant and traveller in the Levant he accumulated a wealth of practical knowledge beyond language skills, including local customs of food, drink, and dress. His cultural fluency was convincing enough for him to pass as a Berber in Tunis, where he negotiated the re-settlement of a group of Carmelites for Louis XIV. It is ironic that after his impassioned speech about the loss of monarchical grandeur incurred by 'playing the Turk', he was commanded by Louis XIV to assist Molière in assuring the authenticity of the Turkish aspects, including costume design, of the newly-commissioned play, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*.<sup>25</sup> Before he took up this role, however, he acted as translator for Louis XIV's audience with Soliman Aga.

### The Royal Audience: The Sun King and the Oriental Impostor

Diplomatic audiences with the French king were only granted to ambassadors, who merited the attention of the monarch through their status as representatives capable of acting on behalf of their masters. Soliman Aga's undisclosed status challenged this established diplomatic protocol. Preliminary attempts to determine his status through de Lionne's replication of Turkish diplomacy were unsuccessful to the point of embarrassment. Refusing to grant an audience, and thereby refusing to accept the Sultan's letter, carried the risk of jeopardising the already tenuous diplomatic relationship. Receiving an envoy as an ambassador could result in a loss of face, showing that in his desperation to preserve their relationship, the king would violate protocol and grant an audience to a mere courier. As an official audience with the king, the details of the event attracted significant attention, recorded not only by royal officials, but also by the *gazetiers* and individual diarists who were present.

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<sup>24</sup> D'Arvieux, 1735, p. 150. "Quant à la ceremonie, j'avois pris la liberté de lui dire qu'il me sembloit pas fort convenable d'affecter des manières Turques en France, & qu'il auroit mieux valu recevoir l'Envoyé selon le grandeur Françoisse, que de nous abbaissier à prendre les leurs, en abandonnant les nôtres; d'autant que pour garder une juste égalité, il ne falloit agir comme ils agissent; et comme ils ne quittent ni leurs coûtumes quand il viennent chez nous, il me sembloit que c'étoit donner atteinte à la grandeur de nôtre Monarque, de nous conformer à des manieres qui nous sont tout à fait étrangères."

<sup>25</sup> Longino, 2002, p. 114.

The gazettes and official records all gave detailed reports of the king's reception and emphasised the number and size of diamonds covering Louis XIV's hat and clothes: 'At the end of this beautiful hallway was a golden throne ... and the King appeared there in all his Majesty, dressed in golden brocade, but so completely covered in diamonds that he seemed surrounded by light'.<sup>26</sup> This is the first record of Louis XIV appearing in diamonds for a diplomatic audience. He had recently purchased many large diamonds from the gem merchant and traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier in March of 1669.<sup>27</sup> The contemporary diarist Olivier Lefèvre d'Ormesson, who was present at the reception, noted that the king's new outfit was rumoured to have cost fourteen million *livres*.<sup>28</sup> Despite the growing uncertainty that the Turkish diplomat was not actually an ambassador, the king appeared in his most magnificent clothing, covered in diamonds. These precious stones were not only incredibly expensive, but also would have been recognised symbolically as evidence of the king's global reach. Sourced from India, and highly prized by 'Oriental' rulers, diamonds conveyed Louis XIV's magnificence while simultaneously referencing his connection to the East.

The depiction of the audience between Soliman Aga and Louis XIV (Fig. 3) bears little resemblance to any accounts of the event, except that the king is seated on a raised throne and Aga approaches, kneeling. Despite the caption referring to the 'magnificence of the audience', few elements of the engraving convey the glitter of French noblemen in gem-studded outfits or sumptuous furnishings described by contemporary participants. The dress of the Turks, however, appears more luxurious than the eyewitness accounts reported. By moderating the visual disparity in the representations of Louis XIV and the Turkish envoy, the image diminished the diplomatic slight suffered by the king.

In contrast to the brilliance of the Sun King, the portrayal of Soliman Aga by contemporary observers was decidedly unremarkable, at best. Most of the accounts of the event are consistent, but the descriptions by Saintot and d'Ormesson included details that stand out. Saintot mentioned that none of the Turks, including Soliman Aga, wore swords or armour.<sup>29</sup> This is significant in that a sabre and

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<sup>26</sup> La Gazette, 1669B. "Il y avait au bout de cette charmante Galerie, un Trône d'argent... et le Roi y paraissait dans toute sa Majesté, revêtu d'un Brocart d'or, mais tellement couvert de Diamants, qu'il semblait qu'il fût environné de lumière."

<sup>27</sup> BNF Mélanges Colbert 281, paiements à Tavernier. For a thorough discussion of Louis XIV's diamonds see: Bimbenet-Privat, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> D'Ormesson, 1669. p. 577.

<sup>29</sup> BNF MS 16633, p. 125.



*cuirasseur*, a metal breastplate, were customary symbols associated with the diplomatic dress of a Turkish ambassador. In his diary, the recalled ambassador, Denis de la Haye Vantelet, cited Aga's possession of these items on his departure as evidence that he was sent in the capacity of an ambassador.<sup>30</sup> D'Arvieux's memoirs also record Soliman Aga as originally carrying a sabre when he first arrived at the Hôtel de Vénise.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 3. Lepotre. *La Magnifique Audiance* donnée le 5 Décembre 1669 à S. Germain en Laye par le Roy très chrestien à Soliman Aga Musta-Feraga, envoyé du grand seigneur, print. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE FOL-QB-2.

<sup>30</sup> BL Add MS 72560, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> D'Arvieux 1735, p. 154.



The journal of Olivier Lefèvre d'Ormesson painted a more negative picture of the Turkish representative. While the basic elements of his description matched the report in the *Gazette*, the tone conveyed disgust with the envoy's uncharacteristically bedraggled appearance. It did not seem that he used this as a technique to emphasise the magnificence of Louis XIV, rather he conveyed genuine surprise that the Turk took so little pride in the way he presented himself: 'At three o'clock, the Turk arrived, led by twenty of his countrymen, all in green serge robes and very dirty turbans, and he wore a cheap red jacket (it certainly wasn't gold brocade or silk) ... Nothing has ever seemed so poor or so miserable.'<sup>32</sup> The remainder of the journal entry is matter-of-fact and dispassionate, but it can hardly be described as a positive impression.

In his audience with Louis XIV, after the usual exchange of formal greetings, the letter to the king was finally produced. Soliman Aga attempted to make the king rise to accept the letter, but the king refused, and Soliman Aga was forced to place it on the king's knees. Louis XIV handed the letter to D'Arvieux, who quickly ascertained that the Turkish word for diplomatic representative – *elçi* – was missing, and after relating this to the king, handed the letter to de Lionne. Louis XIV had been duped into granting an audience to a messenger, dressed in diamonds. He dismissed Soliman Aga, and declared that he had nothing to say to him. He had seen the letter, and the envoy would receive a reply when the king was ready to send him home.

The shimmering brilliance of Louis XIV is contrasted with the humble attire of Soliman Aga. Despite the risk of granting a royal audience to a mere envoy, the king chose to display his most recent acquisitions from India as manifestations of his grandeur, while Soliman Aga, according to contemporary observers, did not dress appropriately for the diplomatic reception. It is tempting to focus on the combined effect of his questionable dress and behaviour as a deliberate attempt by the Ottoman envoy to magnify the diplomatic insult of forcing the French king to breach protocol. Such an interpretation would imply that the Sultan and Grand Vizier were not only confident that Louis XIV would not risk the diplomatic repercussions of refusing to grant an audience to their representative, but also that

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<sup>32</sup> 'Sur les trois heures, le Turc arriva, précédé de vingt Turcs tous avec des robes vertes de serge et des turbans fort sales, luy avec une veste rouge de Camelot au plus (car il n'y a parut point d'or ny de soie) ... Rien ne parut si pauvre ny si miserable.' D'Ormesson 1669, p. 578.

they were not worried about damaging the diplomatic relationship, as France did not represent a threat to the Ottoman Empire, beyond the loss of customs revenue.

Such an interpretation, however, overlooks the possibility that the Ottoman Empire was genuinely concerned about French intervention in the siege of Candie in 1669, until French naval support was withdrawn in late August of that year.

Correspondence from on board the ship transporting Soliman Aga, from M. Matharel dated 30 June 1669, suggests that the Grand Vizier and Sultan were concerned about a rupture in diplomatic relations with France, but were ambivalent about sending an ambassador to France. The author of this letter was firmly convinced, nonetheless, that Soliman Aga was being sent in the capacity of an ambassador, when he commented that despite being referred to as '*elchi*' [sic], a term he said was used not only for ambassadors but for all envoys, that Soliman was certainly an ambassador: 'I left Larissa on June 12 with Soliman Aga who was given the title of ambassador, because the Turks use the term Elchi [sic] without distinguishing between ambassadors, resident agents and envoys'.<sup>33</sup> The absence of the word *elçi* in the envoy's *letter de créance*, however, suggests that Turkish diplomats knew of the Western confusion about this title and deliberately omitted it to avoid any possible interpretation that Soliman Aga was acting in the capacity of anything more than a courier. The breaches of protocol indicated by the envoy's behaviour and attire were confirmed in writing.

The other conspicuous absence in Soliman Aga's embassy was his ceremonial armour, which the French ambassador de la Haye Vantelet claimed to have seen amongst the cargo sent with the Turkish envoy. This observation, coupled with the eyewitness account of M. Matharel, who was convinced of the Turk's status as ambassador, raises another possible interpretation of the events, first suggested by Jean Chardin in his *Journal du voyage*, published in 1685.<sup>34</sup> Soliman Aga may have boarded his ship to France in the capacity of an ambassador, but received a second set of instructions, to be used only if the Venetians (and the French) surrendered at Candie. M. Matharel repeatedly mentioned extended delays in departing while letters of instruction were being sent and received from the Grand Vizier and his advisors at Candie. French forces abandoned their efforts in late August, a week

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<sup>33</sup> AAECF 1669, supplement 6, 355. Letter from M. Matharel to M. Matharel 30 June 1669: 'je partis de Larisse la 12 Juin avec Solymen Aga a qui l'on a fort donnée l'ambassadeur a cause les turcs l'appellent Elchi sans considerer parmi cas le nomme d'Elchi se donne non seulement aux ambassadeurs mais a tous les residens et a tous ceux qui sont envoyés.'

<sup>34</sup> Chardin, 1686, p. 33.



after Salomon Aga arrived in Toulon.<sup>35</sup> Without the threat of continued French military intervention, the Sultan and Grand Vizier would have been less concerned about damaging diplomatic relations with France, and Soliman Aga could appear before Louis XIV in the capacity of a messenger, not as an ambassador. Despite the observations of de la Haye and Matharel, no archival evidence conclusively supports Chardin's interpretation. Nonetheless, the scenario is plausible, and explains Soliman Aga's instructions to only reveal his *lettre de créance* to the king, and the transformation of his behaviour and appearance that occurred in the months between leaving the Sublime Porte and his audience with the king.

## Conclusion

For Louis XIV, the embassy was a failure on several fronts. He had lost face, as the most powerful Christian king, by receiving a messenger in a manner reserved for plenipotentiaries. His willingness to take this risk reflected the importance of Ottoman trade for French merchants. Rather than take punitive diplomatic action against the Sultan for sending a representative with a letter only to be opened by the king, Louis XIV was persuaded by Colbert to repair diplomatic relations with the hope of improving commerce. D'Arvieux had suggested to Colbert to send an agent as a commercial representative, as opposed to an ambassador, as a practical solution to the diplomatic relationship. This option was rejected, largely due to complaints by merchants in Provence, as lacking the necessary ceremonial weight to re-establish the '*parfaite correspondance inviolable*.'<sup>36</sup>

While Louis XIV was persuaded that increased grandeur would repair Franco-Ottoman ties, he chose a play as a means of deflecting the diplomatic affront sustained during Soliman Aga's embassy.<sup>37</sup> The king commissioned Lully and Molière to create a *divertissement oriental*. The new *comédie-ballet*, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, featured the topical themes of mistaken identity and miscommunication, and provided a comedic context through which the court could view the Sultan's diplomatic deception. D'Arvieux was enlisted by the king as costume consultant for his first-hand experience of the Orient: 'to add something of

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<sup>35</sup> Soliman Aga is described as 'une Personne de haute condition, que le Grand Seigneur envoie au Roi, en qualité d'Ambassadeur.' *La Gazette* 1669C, p. 857.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from the Grand Caïmacan to the 'Grand Vizier of France', Mustafa Pacha, quoted in Arvieux, 1735, p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> Longino, 2002, p. 109.

the manners and the dress of the Turks'.<sup>38</sup> While D'Arvieux went to considerable lengths to ensure the authenticity of the costumes, they were the only truly Turkish element of the play. Through the reductive force of stereotype and parody Turkish culture was distorted and bent to the will of French culture: the language used by Turks in the play is mimicked by a fictional language sprinkled with a smattering of commonly recognisable Turkish words; Islam and the Koran are mocked; and, visual clichés such as whirling dervishes serve as ornamental backdrops to provide a veneer of exoticism.<sup>39</sup>

As in the meeting between Hugues de Lionne and Soliman Aga, the costuming for *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* was authentic, but the language was incomprehensible. In Molière's play, however, the legitimacy of Turkish language is denied, and Turkish dress only functions as a theatrical costume for comedic effect. The rejection of Turkish culture in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* not only serves to recover face lost in the diplomatic encounter, but also more generally to reclaim French cultural superiority over the novelty of Eastern exoticism. Similarly, the overstated grandeur of Louis XIV in his audience with Soliman Aga was not merely a miscalculation of diplomatic protocol. While his willingness to receive a diplomat of an undisclosed status revealed the importance the king placed on trade with the Ottoman Empire, his mode of dress echoed D'Arvieux's comment that 'it would be better to receive the Envoy in a manner according to the grandeur of France.'<sup>40</sup> Adorned from head to toe in newly acquired diamonds, Louis XIV re-established the dominant status of his monarchy, simultaneously referencing immense wealth and a commercial connection to the East.

**Garritt Van Dyk** is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. His doctoral thesis, entitled *Commerce, Food, and Identity in Seventeenth-century England and France*, considers the role that commerce has played in the transmission of ideas, including the relationship between food and identity, using economic history to examine both commercial and cultural exchange in the trading networks of England and France.

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<sup>38</sup> 'on pût faire entrer quelque chose des habillements et des manières des Turcs', Arvieux, 1735, p. 252.

<sup>39</sup> Longino, 2002, p. 145.

<sup>40</sup> Arvieux, 1735, p. 150.

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## Illustrations

**Figure 1.** Jean Lepautre, *Le Roy, mon maître gouverne luy-même, il voit tout, il entend tout, il ordonne de tout, etc. Audiance de M. de Lyonne à Soliman Mustaferraga*, 1669, print, Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE FOL-QB-201 (49), Hennin, 4519.

**Figure 2.** Philippe de Champaigne, *Portrait of Jean de Thévenot*, ca.1660. Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 43.2 cm, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical

Gardens. Purchased with funds from the Art Collectors' Council and the Browning Memorial Art Fund, Object Number: 2010.2.

**Figure 3.** Lepotre. La Magnifique Audiance donnée le 5 Décembre 1669 à S. Germain en Laye par le Roy très chrestien à Soliman Aga Musta-Feraga, envoyé du grand seigneur, print. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, RESERVE FOL-QB-201 (49), Hennin, 4520.

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